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AUTHOR Hirst, Lois A.; Slavik, Christy
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ABSTRACT

Ways that both cultural differences and learning styles affect a child's ability to learn and use language are discussed and applied to the situation faced by Native American students. Cultural differences are cited as holding the answer to questions about the Native American student's lack of success on standardized tests and in the American education system in general. The following topics are examined: brain research in terms of learning style preference; students' home culture and varying behavior standards (e.g., silence versus talking); cooperative learning and group participation in which outcome results from common effort; cooperative learning and reading in terms of the cooperative and social nature of literacy; the Shared Book Experience Approach developed by Holdaway; and the role of cooperative learning in science instruction. It is concluded that research confirms that approaches to language learning that incorporate opportunities to use all learning modalities in cooperative contexts are optimal for all children. The strategies are particularly appropriate for Native American children who learn best by using all their senses in environments where cooperation is emphasized. Contains 14 references. (LB)

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Cooperative Approaches to Language Learning

Lois A. Hirst
Christy Slavik

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The American education system, like its European ancestor, emphasizes quantitative and verbal knowledge. This system values objective, scientific approaches to reality, verbal skills, mathematics, and symbol manipulation. It is based on competition and an individualistic goal structure. Most recently, student success in this system is measured by standardized tests that have been standardized in terms of white middle-class norms, and questions on the tests are selected from experiences that the white middle class typically have encountered. However, research indicates that not all cultures value this western world view of science and individualism and not all students learn the way the American education system expects them to learn. Students come to school from different cultures, with different experiences, and using different learning styles (Ogbu, 1988).

Native American students have not been as successful on standardized tests and in the American education system in general as students from the white middle class. We must look into cultural differences to find the answer for the Native American student's lack of success. The educational system of any society tries to transmit the prevailing culture in the most effective and efficient manner by selecting those characteristics that have the most value according to the imposed dictates of the society. Cultural differences can account for some major differences in learning styles. In addition to speaking different languages, in many Native American cultures more emphasis

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is placed on a subjective, artistic view of the world interpreted through drawing and other visual and spatial skills.

Two very different ways of observing and interpreting the world meet the Native American student in the American school system. The majority of teachers come from the prevailing white middle class American culture and have been taught to accept the European model of education. Research on hemisphericity may give us some insight on learning style preferences of these different cultures.

Brain research

Brain research has led to an exploration of learning style preference. Teachers need to plan activities that stimulate both the left and right brain processes. However, research does indicate that Native American students may be culturally right-brain dominant. James Hand (1986) states that there are a number of characteristics that distinguish left and right brained functions:

Left hemisphere	**Right hemisphere**
verbal, linguistic	intonation, inflection
ideation (abstractions)	pictorial & pattern sense
conceptual similarities	visual similarities
sense of time	location in space
controls right side of body	controls left side of body
numerics, quantities	melodic perception
logic	poetic processing
outlook	insight
geometric configurations	

It should be noted that both hemispheres share in mental activities. Scientists have not discovered any one higher intellectual function controlled entirely by one hemisphere.

Teachers can increase learning and the use of brain capacity by determining what the dominant learning modality of each student is and supplying activities to stimulate that modality. However, multiple channelling (learning through a number of sensory factors: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) is one of the most powerful methods for increasing

connections made in the human brain. Research indicates a higher learning rate and greater retention of learning when information is processed through multiple senses.

Instead of merely sitting and silently reading the names of the bones of the feet, the student can read them aloud and at the same time allow himself to touch various areas of his feet as he calls out the name. He can visualize a giant walking through a village. Using his imagination's x-ray vision, the student can see all the bones in the giant's feet as he storms through the village. When the student can name all the bones of the feet, the giant must leave the village. The student can proceed to play such a game for each set of bones in the body until he has memorized them all. When he wants to recall the names of the bones, he can go back to the village and reenact this game with the giant, he can recall the sounds of the names and the tactile sensations of having experiences corresponding to points of his own body, and he can recall the printed words in the book. This is a simple example of multiple channeling (Quina, 1989).

Cultural differences

Understanding the students' home culture is vital for understanding basic aspects of their behavior both in and out of the classroom, including language related behaviors. Different cultures have varying standards of what is and is not acceptable or respectful behavior. Silence versus talking, touching, smiling, eye contact, competition versus cooperation, leadership roles, and expectations of the teacher's role can all differ depending on standards of a culture. Differences between a teacher's culture and that of students' can create conflicts and misunderstandings.

Schaffer (1988) in her article, "English as a Second Language for the Indian Student," points out that group activities in public schools have been groups with one leader putting the student in competitive roles which is against Native American cultures. She gives two examples of traditional ways Native American students learn. Silent observation is one. An example would be when children are present at a storytelling session but do not speak, or when

children observe an adult performing a task such as weaving. Many of us have begun to learn how to cook, sew, ride a horse, and so forth through silent observation. Supervised participation is the second example. When children have observed a task long enough to feel capable of successfully performing it, they participate in some part of the task under adult supervision. Recent researchers such as Madeline Hunter would define this as guided practice. The teacher stands close by while the student tries the activity by himself for the first time.

Schaffer goes on to talk about conflicts that are created because of cultural differences. Calling on individual students to respond puts the student in an adversarial relationship with the teacher. The student is singled out and forced to respond instantly and on demand in front of other students. Traditionally children were often given as much time as they needed before being called upon to demonstrate ability to perform, were allowed to test their ability in private before performing publicly, and avoided competitive roles with others.

Teachers in classrooms have several ways to structure academic lessons so that students learning styles are taken into consideration and they can best achieve. A teacher may have them 1) in a win-lose struggle to see who is best; 2) learning individually on their own without interacting with classmates; or 3) learning in pairs or small groups, helping each other master the assigned material.

Cooperative learning

For the past forty-five to fifty years, since the demise of the one room schoolhouse, American education has been on a competitive and individualistic basis. In both learning situations, teachers try to keep students away from each other. "Don't copy," "Don't worry about your neighbor -- take care of yourself," and "Move your desks apart" are some common phrases heard in classrooms. There is another way. Cooperative learning allows students to work together to reach common goals. Cooperation means more than putting students in groups. It means group participation in a project

in which the outcome results from common effort, the goal is shared and each person's success is linked with every other person's success. In practice, this means that ideas and materials are shared, labor is divided, and everyone in the groups is rewarded for the successful completion of the task.

A cooperative group is defined as two to five students who are tied together by a common purpose -- to complete the task and to include every group member. Cooperative groups differ from typical classroom groups in the following ways:

1) In typical groups, one leader is chosen by the teacher; in a cooperative group, leadership is shared so that all students are responsible for completion of the task and all group members are included.
2) In typical groups, groups are homogeneous in nature; in cooperative groups, members are chosen randomly, or selected by the teacher on the basis of gender, ability, interests, behavior, etc. so that the groups are heterogeneous as possible.
3) In typical groups, members create their own product, have their own materials and have rewards based on individual accomplishment. In a cooperative group, the group creates one product and/or shares materials, and/or has a group reward based on the success as a group.
4) In typical groups, students are told to "cooperate" with no attempt to teach social skills. In a cooperative group, social skills are defined, discussed, observed and processed.
5) In typical groups, the teacher interrupts group work to solve problems, warn students and remind them. In a cooperative group, the teacher encourages group problem-solving. He is an interactor rather than an intervener.
6) In a typical group, the top priority is to accomplish the task -- get the job done. In a cooperative group, the top priority is to accomplish the task *and* to include every member through each person's use of social skills. (Johnson & Johnson, 1983)

Cooperative learning situations, compared to competitive or individualistic ones, promote greater achievement motivation, more intrinsic motivation, more persistence in completing the tasks, and greater continuing motivation to learn. Cooperative learning experiences also result in more positive attitudes toward the subject area and instructor than do the other two instructional approaches. Cooperative learning experiences also result in higher levels of self-esteem, healthier processes for deriving conclusions about one's self worth, and greater psychological health than do competitive and individualistic learning experiences (Johnson & Johnson, 1983).

Cooperative learning and reading

Reading instruction is usually not seen as a time to develop these cooperative and social skills. Ninety-eight per cent of reading instruction in the United States is focused on the use of the basal reading series, and its typical management system encourages division and competition. Children are typically grouped and placed at appropriate levels of instruction according to academic ability. Individual performance in groups is stressed, not cooperation. Rasinski and Nathenson-Mejia (1987) argue that school, and particularly reading instruction, should promote cooperative and socialization skills,

> Schools must help children see that they live in a world of others and bear a responsibility to others. Selflessness, not selfishness, is as important a determinant of the viability of a society as are the academic levels its citizens achieve. (p. 260)

They conclude, "the purpose of school is to teach children how to live together as well as how to know" (p. 265).

A growing body of research on effective literacy instruction and developmental learning confirms that programs which stress the cooperative and social nature of literacy are most appropriate (Goodman, 1980; Meek, 1982; Smith, 1978; Clay, 1980). Such programs are characterized by

shared literacy experiences, emphasis on the development of skills in the context of authentic literacy episodes and working and talking in groups to promote social and cooperative skills as the teacher adopts the role of a facilitator.

Hepler and Hickman (1982) refer to classrooms which exemplify these traits as "communities of readers." They feel that the establishment of such communities is essential to the successful development of literacy. The authors identify the ways in which classmates socialize and cooperate together as they find their way to reading. They observed children turning to each other: for information about what to read, to explore meanings together, as an audience for the sharing of extension activities, and as models for reading behavior. The teacher in these communities assumes the role of community planner. This notion of the social nature of reading is corroborated by researcher Margaret Meek who confirms that, "for all the reading research we have financed, we are certain only that good readers pick their own way to literacy in the company of friends who encourage and sustain them and that the enthusiasm of a trusted adult can make the difference" (1982, p. 60). This premise of learning literacy in the context of a cooperative community of learners best supports the Native American learning style because children use all their senses to make discoveries and are immersed in an environment where students and teachers work to support each other. This feeling of cooperation and community is reflected in the Native American family structure.

The Shared Book Experience Approach

One approach to beginning reading instruction which fosters these cooperative and social skills is the Shared Book Experience Approach developed by Don Holdaway. The materials and strategies provide equal opportunities for all students to share book experiences by de-emphasizing cultural and academic differences. Holdaway stresses that reading instruction should be non-competative and states,

> There is no greater source of inefficiency in school methods of teaching language than the dependence on

> competition as a motivator. The real business of learning is concerned with performing better than yesterday or last week: it has absolutely nothing to do with performing better than someone else. Children want to learn any developmental task in order to be *the same* as their peers, not better than them. (1980, p. 18)

He developed his approach in response to New Zealand educators' concerns that populations of Native Polynesian and Maori children were not succeeding in traditional reading and language programs. Two major goals for instruction were established:

1. children would not be segregated by ability
2. children of different cultural backgrounds would experience success.

The Shared Book Experience Approach is modeled upon the framework for the natural acquisition of oral language (Holdaway, 1982). Young children learn to speak in a supportive social context in which they seek to communicate meaning. Their purpose is to be understood and to have their needs met. Holdaway strives to replicate these dimensions in his literacy program. Texts used in the approach are selections from quality children's literature and are to be shared and enjoyed. These selections have been enlarged so that they can be shared with large groups and are called Big Books. The teacher's role is to induce rather than to directly teach a process. As the class enjoys books, active participation is encouraged as together, children respond in unison, discuss, and become involved in extension activities. The lessons are presented to involve children in using their visual, auditory, and kinesthetic senses. In these contexts, social and cooperative skills are promoted and developed. Each child's progress is monitored individually and there is no competition among peers.

The success of this approach has been thoroughly documented and the model has been adapted internationally (Holdaway, 1982). children from diverse backgrounds perform

at levels equal to or above their peers. In addition, all children seem to develop very positive attitudes about reading. Thus, children who participate in this program which emphasizes cooperative and social skills seem to become communities of readers as described by literacy experts such as Yetta Goodman and Frank Smith. They also are involved in opportunities to use all learning modalities and language learning is strengthened.

Cooperative learning and science

Testing hypotheses while conducting a science experiment can also offer groups of students opportunities to work cooperatively and use multiple functions of language. As participants work together to think critically about a science experiment, they use language to speculate about and develop conclusions. Social and cooperative skills are cultivated as the students listen critically to each other, work to involve all participants, and negotiate meaning together. Opportunities are also present to employ the visual, kinesthetic, and auditory senses to increase learning connections.

Conclusion

Educators must recognize the forceful ways in which both cultural differences and learning styles impact upon a child's ability to learn and use language. Research confirms that approaches to language learning which incorporate opportunities to use all learning modalities in cooperative contexts are optimal for all children. These strategies are particularly appropriate for Native American children who learn best by using all their senses in environments where cooperation is emphasized. The most powerful language curricula are those which maximize opportunities for multiple channeling and cooperative learning.

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